

# "Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn:" Performing Class, Sentiment, and Femininity in the "People's War"

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## Abstract

Vera Lynn embodies nostalgic constructions of World War II as a good war. Though phenomenally popular, her radio performances inspired debates over sentimentality and women's voices on air. This article examines how her performances enacted national wartime values while provoking controversy and argues that even "compliant" cultural production does important political work.

## Résumé

Vera Lynn exprime les interprétations nostalgiques de la deuxième guerre mondiale comme étant une bonne guerre. Quoique sa popularité fut phénoménale, ses séances à la radio inspirèrent des débats sur la sentimentalité et sur la voix des femmes sur les ondes. Cet article étudie la façon dont ses performances représentaient les valeurs sentimentales durant la guerre tout en provoquant une controverse et dénote que même une production culturelle "accommodante" accomplit un travail politique important.

Dame Vera Lynn is iconic in the cultural memory of World War II as a good "People's War" for Britain, in which people united across class lines, women moved unproblematically into supportive roles for men in the services, wartime separations heightened romance, and morale never wavered. Her "reassuring" voice, sympathetic persona, sentimental repertory, and symbiosis with the media of radio and recordings all contributed to her phenomenal wartime popularity and sobriquet as "No. 1 Sweetheart to the Forces"; in many ways, her singing functioned as a supportive soundtrack during the war and in its memory. The nostalgic construction of Vera Lynn's performances as "soundtrack" for the British war effort obscures, however, their cultural work in the wartime discourses surrounding class distinction, national identity, and gender roles. It fails to explain how her performances so potently enacted national values in wartime and why she elicited such passionate fandom and vitriolic critique.

Lynn's wartime radio performances, especially in the series *Sincerely Yours - Vera Lynn*, are ideal sites to address these questions because of the ways that her mastery of radio's tension between individual and mass address contributed to the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) wartime aim "to maintain national unity and to secure the nation's morale" (Nicholas 1996, 2). Radio was central in Lynn's career; she explained, "Live broadcasting over the BBC was for me the link, the point of my most intimate contact with the people" (1975, 148). Despite its wartime concern with

providing morale-boosting "entertainment and diversion" (Briggs 1995, 75), the BBC was deeply ambivalent about Lynn's on-air presentation, singing style, and broader star persona, particularly the ways in which they referenced the troubling category of the sentimental. This paper examines three aspects of Lynn's wartime cultural work: the corporeality of her voice including the pre-war "pedagogies" of working class club and dance band performance that shaped it, her location within the BBC and its institutional commitment to morale-building entertainment, and her situation within discourses of total war, class, femininity, and the sentimental. In doing so, I argue for understanding even seemingly compliant cultural production as sites of negotiation and political work.

#### Vocal Codes

In this section, I examine the grain of Lynn's voice and excavate the performative "pedagogies" that made her so central in the war and its remembrance. Roland Barthes described the "grain of the voice" as "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue": particular voices conveyed both a corporeality and a close relationship with language (1977, 182). Although Lynn came to have a special affinity with the disembodied soundscape of radio broadcasts and recordings, her autodidactic approach to singing and interpretation was rooted in the live performance traditions of her working class childhood, which she later adapted to encompass the microphone, dance band, and American commercial music. My aim in offering this prehistory is to decode her performance style and voice as hybrids of the past and modernity, British working class sensibilities and popular mass culture; Lynn's wartime importance was inseparable from her pre-war development as a performer.

The nostalgic construction of Lynn as emblematic of the British war effort has obscured most

of her lengthy career. It has ignored not only her pre-war achievements but also her success throughout the post-war era: she topped the American and British pop charts with songs including "Auf Wiederseh'n, Sweetheart" in the 1950s, hosted television series in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and toured extensively in Australia, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. In her 1975 autobiography, Lynn expressed ambivalence about her close association with the war in popular memory: "If it makes me unhappy to come across people who persist in thinking of me only in connection with this period, and in particular with those broadcasts, from the point of view of my personal success and (unintentional) influence, this was the peak time of my professional life, I suppose" (101).

Both narrative and performative reasons have contributed to Lynn's status as nostalgic icon. Like many other successful female singers, Lynn has been excluded in the narratives of post-war popular music, which tend to focus on rock and roll and its values of innovation, masculinity, and white youth consumption of African-American music. Moreover, Lynn did not adapt easily as a performer; she possessed a narrow "technical and emotional range" and selected only repertory that suited it. When popular music incorporated rock elements in the late 1950s and early 1960s - when, according to Lynn, rhythm was emphasized over "strong melodies" and lyrics with "some logic" - she had difficulty finding suitable new songs (1975, 94; 179). Her repertory choices thus enacted nostalgia while her performances evoked memories of wartime listening, especially for European listeners, Allied veterans, and the British. Lynn's symbiosis with sentimental wartime songs tied her inextricably to the Second World War, but she located her sentimental grounding in childhood, when she honed her approach to performance.

Growing up in working class East London as Vera Welch, Lynn became involved in music at an early

age. Her family was comprised of enthusiastic singers, whose activities spanned "sing-song parties" at home, visits to professional music halls, and active involvement in Working Men's Clubs (Lynn 1975, 12-14). The clubs provided an affordable alternative to pubs, serving as social gathering places during the week and offering Sunday concerts (i.e., variety shows by semi-professional entertainers) (Hoggart 1957, 125). Lynn was taught to sing at age two by her Uncle George, who performed at the clubs impressions of the music hall star George Robey; almost as a matter of course, Lynn progressed to performing in the club circuit at age seven (Lynn 1975, 11-13; 21).

From childhood, Lynn's voice existed in tension between the natural and unnatural. The wartime press admiringly described her as a singer without formal training, and Lynn described her interpretations as motivated by instinct: "from my earliest days I seemed to be attracted naturally to the straight-forward sentimental ballad....And I've always been able to decide quickly how to sing a song, how to phrase it, what to emphasize." Her voice was from childhood "distinctive in some uncanny way"; it was "loud, penetrating, and rather low in pitch for my age" (Lynn 1975, 21; 24-26). According to the teacher in a much-repeated account of Lynn's only encounter with formal training, it was an untrainable "freak" voice (Unsigned 1942a). A more feminine, though less lucrative, singing voice existed alongside Lynn's "Other" voice, however. At school, the children's music was pitched too high for Lynn's usual performing voice, forcing her into a "disastrous" "kind of falsetto." In adulthood, Lynn dismissed her higher voice as a playful, private, pseudo-operatic "bath voice." The voice teacher considered it trainable, but for Lynn it was an unmarketable distraction from her professional singing voice (Lynn 1975, 28; 95).

Lynn's "double" singing voice can also be described as consisting of a rarely used head voice and

an invitingly strong and vibrant chest voice. Since she did not employ her upper register, her range in wartime recordings was small (g to b-flat', a little over an octave) or, more accurately, average. Lynn sang in a comfortable range for untrained singers, a valuable quality with the importance of participatory singing in working class culture. Indeed, a recurrent trope in her wartime films was the sing-along, in which her solo voice rose above a chorus of soldiers, factory workers, evacuated school children, or benefit audiences (Wellesley 1943). A thrilling timbre and heartfelt declamation of song lyrics, rather than virtuosic range or technique, rendered Lynn's voice extraordinary.

While her voice's untrained quality, accessible range, and unusual timbre represented continuity between Lynn's childhood and wartime careers, her voice and performance style underwent a significant performative (not biological) shift in adolescence. After eight years on the club circuit, Lynn made the transition to dance band singing: "I appeared with Howard Baker's Band at 16, Billy Cotton's at 17, first broadcast with Joe Loss at 18, and later with Charlie Kunz over a period of 18 months, then joined Ambrose who I have now been with for over 3 years" (Lynn 1940). She progressed rapidly through the dance band ranks, from the local "gig king" Howard Baker to Ambrose, whose band was regarded as the best in Britain. Lynn had to change her approach to performance: rather than acting out her songs, as she had done as a child, she learned to stand still in front of the band while she sang and remain respectfully to the side at other times. Meanwhile, the microphone and the demands of blending with a band required that she sing at a lower volume, which, in turn, "reduced the pressure on [her] voice" and its ability to push up to higher pitches, thus lowering her range. Lynn had become a crooner, for "anyone who sang with a danceband in the thirties was a crooner" (Lynn 1975, 40-41).

From the early 1930s, crooning was considered a dubious American export, along with Hollywood films and streamlined consumer goods (Camporesi 2000, 2). The BBC, which broadcast "name" bands throughout the decade with the aim of providing high quality entertainment music, periodically tried to reduce the number of crooners featured in dance band programmes (Scannell and Cardiff 1991, 189). The problem was not merely "bad vocalising," which contrasted with the full diaphragmatic support of "rousing vocalists," but also crooners' association with commercialism, for singing lyrics on air facilitated the sale of sheet music and gramophone recordings (BBC 1937a). Many songs were imports, published by upstart firms that specialized in numbers that were already hits in the United States (BBC 1937b). With their repertory of American or Americanized commodities, crooners were accused of parroting American singers and adopting American accents. The trade press used American stars as benchmarks but counselled female singers to "be yourselves, girls" (Gray 1939).

Lynn largely escaped crooning's negative associations because she was herself. Even with the modern mediation of the microphone, she maintained a "different" sound by continuing to select her own songs, compensating for her Cockney accent with good (non-Americanized) diction, and trusting her own interpretive approach (Lynn 1975, 50). She might reproduce the sentiments of popular songs, but, as one wartime listener explained, "She treated them with as much tenderness as though they were precious old folk songs" (Hanson 1941). Like Panzéra, the singer invoked by Barthes, Lynn subverted sophisticated songs with a folk-like approach: "something [was] being told, which [listeners] must receive without disguise" (Barthes 1985, 284). The visual analogue to her singing was remarkable in the exclusive venues where her prestigious employers performed: "in dress and mannerisms I must have been

completely unsophisticated," she recalled. Nevertheless, her distinctive style - and impressive radio fan mail - earned the respect of her discriminating bandleader, Ambrose, "even if I didn't buy my clothes from the right places or use the right perfumes or go to the 'in' hairdresser" (Lynn 1975, 50; 62). Her class background and apparent disinterest in the codes of glamorous femininity marked her as personally sincere while her heartfelt declamation of popular songs earned her a significant following before the war. It was Lynn's pre-war experience as child singer and dance band crooner as well as her vocal, stylistic, and class hybridity that positioned her so perfectly to articulate a unifying wartime sensibility.

#### At the Wartime BBC

In the first winter of the war, Lynn transformed from top-ranked dance band singer to hybrid wartime icon. Melody Maker described her new Decca contract as lifting her "clean out of the category of crooners" and into that of the "firm's five leading artists as a handsomely-paid feature vocalist" (Unsigned 1939). When she entered the Variety circuit as a solo act in April 1940, Lynn was associated closely with radio, the medium through which she had gained national fame: in the West End revue *Applesauce*, she rose "through the floor inside a giant model of a radiogram." Lynn viewed the transition as a return to her roots as a child soloist, but she did not abandon the microphone (1975, 83; 90). An offended music hall critic complained, "the microphone destroys the first principle of the living stage, which is direct contact with the audience" (K. 1941). The mediation of sound technologies enabled a different sort of "direct contact," however, with a subtle, yet still audible, delivery - a practice that opened crooners to charges that they conveyed a false sense of intimacy. Undeterred, audiences filled Variety theatres to see "Radio's Sweet

Singer of Sweet Songs," and when the BBC asked the British Expeditionary Forces for record requests, Lynn emerged as the favourite above Americans such as Bing Crosby (Lynn 1975, 92-93). Her popularity took on patriotic and gendered overtones when she was named "No. 1 Sweetheart" to the Forces. Like the sexy, yet girlish, pinups who represented "what men were fighting for," Lynn embodied an attractive British womanhood that reinforced the morale and heterosexual masculinity of the forces (Gubar 1987, 239). Unlike mere images, however, Lynn could envoice and enact these values, a far more complex undertaking.

Lynn's mastery of an intimate, rather than theatrical, address accorded with the BBC's wartime aim of providing entertainment that would improve morale in the forces and unity at home. It engaged Lynn for several new programmes: the six-part comedy Phoney Island; an episode of Ack-Ack, Beer-Beer, a variety show dedicated to Anti-Aircraft and Barrage Balloon units; and, with the beginning of the Blitz, as a regular performer in the series Starlight (BBC 1935-44). Cecil Madden, who oversaw overseas productions, explained, "The aim of Starlight is to provide listeners with amusement and glamour, often sadly lacking under wartime conditions, and to create an imaginative picture of a star in an intimate setting" (n.d.). With its invocation of glamour, the programme promoted an aural version of "beauty as duty" ideologies of wartime femininity in which women were expected, despite shortages, "to keep up appearances and maintain the illusion of normality in the face of extraordinary odds" (Kirkham 1995, 15). Starlight also enacted the realities of total war, "waged by all against all," which disrupted the notion of a feminized home front as a safe location, separated from the real conflict (Gubar 1987, 229). Parade, a magazine for Middle Eastern forces, described overseas broadcasts from the "famous theatre [the Criterion] in the heart of London," where performers

carried on despite the Blitz (Unsigned 1941). Meanwhile, radio transmitted to forces overseas the companionable voices of female singers and announcers, described in the press as "radio girl friends." Lynn's "reassuring" and "unmistakable" voice in Starlight elicited an impressive fan mail response from soldiers (Madden n.d.).

When the BBC producer Howard Thomas discovered that Lynn would be available for six weeks late in 1941, he leaped at the opportunity to present her in a series of half-hour solo programmes. Featuring a popular performer would contribute to the BBC's wartime aim of boosting morale with diverting entertainment; moreover, with British troops stationed throughout the Mediterranean and Africa, Lynn could enact the link between the home front and the forces. The "popular light programme" would be broadcast live on Sunday evenings at 9:30, with Lynn accompanied by Fred Hartley and his Music, a piano and string sextet (BBC 1941a). This was a prime spot, directly after the news and the Postscript, which lent an aura of official approval to the singer and her sentimental repertory. The programme would be "somewhat outside her usual scope" because Lynn would "be required to do a certain amount of dialogue...in addition to singing" (BBC 1941b). The title Sincerely Yours - Vera Lynn conveyed the programme's conceit as "a letter to the men of the Forces from their favourite star, Vera Lynn...news from home in words and music" (BBC n.d.). Following the conventions of "messages programmes" on the Programme for the Forces, Lynn would convey messages from "munition factory girls to their sweethearts and husbands in the Forces, but the high spot will be news to some man in the Services that the expected baby has just arrived in his family" (BBC 1941d).

The formula was wildly successful, with the first broadcast garnering an audience of "23.2%, by far the largest ever recorded at this time on Sunday night in the Forces Programme" (BBC 1941e). Thomas soon

discontinued the baby announcement because "so many people, including district nurses, and so on, [were] ringing us on Sundays with news of babies" (BBC 1941g). Lynn received over 1000 letters weekly, and the series listening figures remained above 20%. The producers endeavoured to contract a second series, a challenge given Lynn's busy touring schedule and recently signed film contracts, but Lynn rearranged her schedule to broadcast another, equally successful, six-part series in February and March 1942.

What made the series such a phenomenon? In a 1955 interview, Thomas explained that he had been very interested in the presentation of people during the war, evoking notions of democratic cooperation. *Sincerely Yours* was built around the presentation of Lynn as a nice girl, rather than a singer of sexy songs - or, as she recalled, "in the rôle of a believable girl-next-door, big-sister, universal-fiancée" (BBC 1955; Lynn 1975, 97). Heard by home and overseas audiences alike, Lynn portrayed the most wholesome of morale-boosting radio girlfriends. Her sincere public persona and performance style were central to the programme, for, as Thomas explained, only a simple and sincere person could believably deliver its sentimental patter and songs.

Lynn's sincerity had strong working class associations. *Sunday Pictorial* wrote, "In that voice you catch the simple sincerity of a humble girl unspoiled. [Despite her success] she is still a typical Cockney, sincere, warmhearted, with a sound business sense" (Unsigned 1942a). Wartime profiles informed readers that Lynn lived on the same street as her mother, who handled most of her fan mail, and that her father was a plumber (he had actually been a plumber's assistant, among other jobs) (Unsigned 1942b; 1944). The press described her love of cooking; affectionate marriage with Harry Lewis, a dance musician serving in the RAF Squadronairs; and their newlywed status as happy homebodies (Stewart 1942). Lynn had not abandoned

her working class roots: she was "simple, unassuming, of the people, charming" (Unsigned 1940). It was necessary to remind the public that Lynn was a Cockney because, just as she had acquired careful diction to sing, she spoke in *Sincerely Yours* with the careful accents of King's English. Nevertheless, the presentation of a Cockney entertainer in a non-comic role was something of a breakthrough. It formed the counterpart to the representation of London's East Enders as particularly heroic in response to the Blitz and pointed to the ideal of a "people's war" commonality.

Sincerity, with its markers of class and gender, was audible in Lynn's voice. In his account of working class life, Richard Hoggart wrote:

No doubt Miss Vera Lynn has a sound idea of the elements she must stress to acquire her characteristic effect - the simplified but forceful emotional pattern, the complicated alternations of emphasis, the extraordinary control of vowel sounds which allows them to carry the feelings required. These are what her listeners want, so that the songs shall call up their special kind of imaginary world. But it is also, I should guess, Miss Lynn's imaginary world, one she naturally inhabits at the actual moment of singing...she sings, as someone has said, in the way a factory-girl hears herself singing in her head.

(1957, 173)

Lynn was a skilled interpreter, but Hoggart naturalized her stylistic decisions as instinctive, emotional belief, the terrain of naïve girls and simpler classes. The notion of a special "imaginary world" evoked escapism, an aspect of wartime entertainment (e.g., imported Hollywood films) that concerned authorities, who worried that it indicated the inability of civilians (especially women) to

negotiate the grim realities of war.

The emotional space that Lynn and her listeners entered was a different sort of fantasy, however, a space of longing for loved ones separated in the war, for communities left in the past, and for the fulfilment of future reunions. This longing can also be construed as nostalgia: Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw recall nostalgia's roots in medical discourse as homesickness and its other meanings, including the desire for a sense of kinship and shared identity (1989, 1-2). With Marita Sturken, they posit the photograph as a technology of memory and the "paradigm case of the moment of nostalgia" (1997, 11; Chase and Shaw 1989, 9). I would argue for popular song as another technology of nostalgia and memory, a portable vehicle in the displacement of total war. For example, Lynn's potent hit "We'll Meet Again," which closed *Sincerely Yours*, articulated a farewell between sweethearts in its verse, but its chorus envoiced a shared faith in a reunion on some future unspecified "sunny day," promised to greet "the folks that you know," and urged the addressee maintain hope (BBC 1941c).<sup>1</sup> Much of the repertory that Lynn performed in *Sincerely Yours* looked nostalgically to the past while its title referenced one of Lynn's most popular wartime love songs, the Latin-style "Yours," which was composed by Gonzalo Roig in 1930 and retrofitted with English lyrics - essentially translated and revived - by Jack Sherr in 1940.

Nostalgia was also powerfully invoked in the lullaby that Lynn featured almost weekly, even after the programme jettisoned baby announcements. With songs like "Baby Mine" from Disney's *Dumbo* (BBC 1941c) and a voice that itself was rooted in a simpler past, she inserted listeners into the ultimate sense of kinship - a child listening to its mother's voice. Among the accounts of the maternal voice offered by Kaja Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror* was its function as a "lost object," the desired thing that "can make good all lacks" (1988,

85-86). Whereas a photograph could evoke a lost moment, the lullaby, animated with music and a disembodied maternal voice, offered a fleeting, though repeatable, sense of fulfilment. Indeed, the entire programme both invoked nostalgia and provided a cure: its place in the schedule contrasted the authoritative voice of the male newsreader and Lynn's musical-maternal voice, creating a reassuring, feminine space on the air.

The term "nostalgia" appeared rarely in wartime Britain, but "sentimentality" was ubiquitous. Feminist literary critics have worked to recuperate the nineteenth-century sentimental novel with its ties to feminine, domestic space (Sedgwick 1990, 144). In many ways, performances by Lynn, who imagined herself at her own fireside, addressing "any number of scattered individuals," and who evoked a variety of female relational roles, resonated with this understanding (du Cane 1942; Lynn 1975, 98). "Sentiment" in wartime song also connoted a dwelling on the absent, both in terms of the missing object and the sensations created by its absence. Lynn's heartfelt declamation took popular song seriously as a meaningful expression of longing, despite its generic address. She described the repertory at which she excelled as the "greeting card song," which expressed emotions that people felt but rarely felt comfortable saying (1975, 81).

Lynn's role in *Sincerely Yours* was intermediary: "When I sing for the boys I feel as though I'm the sort of in-between. I mean that I sing to her from him and tell one what the other wants to say" (Stewart 1942). She also instructed her listeners in better communication:

How often do you write home, and what sort of letters do you write? Here's an idea: next time you write home to your wife, just for once, forget all about the grouse things.

Write about the things that have cheered you up and made you smile....That will cheer her up enormously because her moods and her whole day's happiness depends upon your letters and what they tell her about you. And, when you've written that cheerful letter, just you notice how it's cheered you up, too.

(BBC 1941c)

The programme, itself in the form of a letter, addressed "young marrieds" and single men in the forces, conveying messages from women competently engaged in a variety of wartime occupations. Lynn's sentimental patter on *Sincerely Yours* transformed a couple's romantic longing into a communal experience for a nation at war.

The programme's sentimental emotional space and Lynn's sincerity evaded separation, distance, and mediation. As a singer, Lynn pretended away the problems of mediation: she sang as if the microphone was not present (Glover 1944). The approach, which recalled her pre-war training, was audible: she favoured her middle range, the mellowness of which contrasted with the almost forced quality and nasal timbre at the top, creating an illusion of a higher voice - though in reality, her speaking voice shared its range. The tension in her voice evoked more readily high male crooners than her female contemporaries, even those with low voices, such as Anne Shelton.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, Lynn's use of the microphone, like the address of the radio itself, encompassed listeners both intimately and as a group while her range invited their participation, opening the longed-for possibility of an "imagined community" for scattered wartime audiences. As Richard Dyer has argued, entertainment responded to real needs created by society, but it also structured which needs were recognized: here, the BBC's definition of wartime

entertainment embraced the needs of morale and unity, rather than problems of, say, social inequality. Lynn's escapist entertainment nevertheless opened utopian possibilities by embodying the feelings of fulfilment: community in place of fragmentation, sincerity in place of manipulation, emotional fullness in place of dreariness (Dyer 1981, 183-84).

#### Discourses and Contestation

The success of *Sincerely Yours* inspired several programmes that presented singing radio girlfriends for the troops, but with setbacks in North Africa the BBC grew increasingly concerned that escapist sentiment was inappropriate wartime entertainment. While in November 1941 the BBC had promoted the programme as containing "plenty of sentiment," in March 1942, the Controller of Programmes suggested that most of the "rather wild criticism of the Forces Programme" could be attributed to *Sincerely Yours* with its prime time slot (BBC 1941f and 1942b). A consensus soon emerged that *Sincerely Yours* could use a "general brisking up and changing of patter" (BBC 1942c). Thomas countered that Lynn was "essentially a singer of sentimental songs" and that it was difficult to find "bright" songs she would sing; meanwhile, the formula had been "imitated to such an extent that the public must be tiring of it." The solution was to rest Lynn while promoting an "antidote" of virile, "man-to-man" programmes featuring marching songs (BBC 1942d).

The BBC embraced Thomas's solution, which cohered with its decision to ban "slushy" songs, along with male crooners and overly sentimental, insincere female singers. Nevertheless, the fact that only female singers who were both insincere and overly sentimental were censured confirmed Lynn's exceptional status for the Corporation. Authoritative voices in the press embraced the virility campaign, but the ban provoked increasingly spirited protests from listeners, particularly



servicemen. Despite being viewed as a "warm, human ball of sentimentality," Lynn's popularity flourished, especially as her first films appeared (Scott-James 1942). Between the BBC's fears of sentiment and Lynn's busy performing schedule, however, she did not broadcast another series until fall 1944. A *Variety* critic reflected: "The Sincerely Yours programmes dripped with sentiment. After a bit they apparently dripped so much that they were dropped. Now, somewhat disdainfully, Vera Lynn invites one to regard the General Forces Programme, which is the...idea of her own programme multiplied one hundredfold" (Glover 1944).

Though relatively absent from the programme guide, Lynn still embodied all that was wrong with wartime radio entertainment. In spring 1944, a storm ensued following Earl Winterton's question in Parliament regarding the necessity for broadcasting so many female crooners, whose voices he compared to "the caterwauling of an inebriated cockatoo" (Lackey 1944). Clarifying his views, he tempered misogyny with class and morale anxieties. Although he appreciated the genuine Cockney accent, he loathed its show business permutations, especially the "'refaned' Cockney." Cockneys like Lynn who adopted more marketable accents disturbed traditions of class identification. Winterton feared that crooners' sentimental repertory, concerned with "domestic canoodling," distracted servicemen from their duty. Countering the BBC's objective of linking distant forces and the home front, he argued that soldiers had to "forget...domestic ties. They are out to kill or be killed. [War] is a tough, horrible, but necessary business" (1944). His critiques of women crooners aligned with traditional understandings of sentimentality as "derogatory code" for the feminine, although modern technologies of radio communication and total war gave lie to notions of a separate feminine space (Sedgwick 1990, 144).

The vitriolic attacks on Lynn cannot be

explained simply as a matter of a feminized Other to wartime assertions of virile masculinity, according to a heterosexual binary, for BBC producers cast female singers as substitutes for male crooners: "We invariably...cut out male 'crooners' or 'high tenors' and include bright girls, for whom there is a real demand by, say, Forces in the Desert. Male crooners are quite divorced from the reality of the times, and to plug the girls is to show the men that the women are doing men's jobs these days" (BBC 1942a). The expansion of women's roles, ostensibly to free men for combat, expressed the reach of total war while unmasking the lie of naturalized gender (though some critics argued that women's voices were biologically unfitted for the microphone). Women moved into the powerful position of envoicing the hegemonic BBC, even as they were presented as unthreatening radio girlfriends. Madden celebrated the ways in which their correspondence with soldiers and on-air performances contributed to the war effort: "This was a war fought with radio: radio for propaganda: radio for morale. These girls did their bit. They were friendly, they had sex appeal, they filled a need" (Madden n.d.). The very effort expended in their broadcast, however, highlighted the performative qualities of femininity, particularly its wartime incarnation as resolute glamour, and inspired anxious debate about women's roles in broadcasting.

Female crooners such as Lynn not only took on "unnatural" wartime roles but also entered a queer space as replacements for the ambivalent male crooner, a performer who was marked as effeminate and demoralizing at a time when the nation was obsessed with the masculinity and morale of its fighting men. Whether they possessed ambiguously low voices like Shelton or carried the timbral qualities of male crooners like Lynn, they were associated closely with the sentimental, which was itself marked as queer in twentieth-century modernity, as Eve Sedgwick has

argued. Sedgwick has pointed to how sentiment took on the status of epithet, linked with "the insincere, the manipulative, the vicarious" - all charges flung at crooners. The sentimental also functioned as a relationship, a sort of perverse empathy, in which the vicarious "sentimental spectator" identified with the spectacle of a suffering - often male - body (1990, 143; 151; 146). War, even total war, moved the suffering of servicemen to the centre of national consciousness. With other wartime institutions, the BBC directed much of its energy to relieving the suffering, discomfort, and loneliness of distant servicemen. For those already concerned about morale and virility in the forces, the sympathetic performances in *Sincerely Yours* functioned as a disturbing spectacle of sentiment. Lynn's critics cast her home front sentimentality as an inauthentic, self-indulgent form of identification. The charge that Lynn's expression of pop song sentiments was vicarious and false threatened to collapse the sincerity that was essential to her persona.

Lynn easily managed the slings from her critics. She sometimes responded in print, but largely, she conveyed her sincerity through her voice in recordings and her bodily presence, whether in lucrative Variety appearances, in Entertainments National Service Association performances throughout the country, or in her exhausting, four-month tour of hospitals and camps in Burma. Her voice rendered her performances unique, imparting a special meaning to the words that she declaimed.

Lynn's distinctive voice made her irresistible to impersonators, however, and these performances could inflict real damage. In early 1945, she took a stand against performers who impersonated her in Variety and over the air. Some were dismissive, but the BBC began to require that impersonators obtain her permission before imitating her. Lynn regarded most of the impersonations as malicious; more importantly, her fans

had protested. "I owe everything to my fans," Lynn declared. "These impersonations represent an attack, not on my performance, but on my sincerity, and I am passionately sincere when I say that so long as my type of work (which you may like or dislike) is capable of giving pleasure to countless thousands of boys... I intend to go on entertaining them in the way they expect of me" (1945).

It was Lynn's powerful ways of relating personal longing to a sense of greater meaning and community that rendered her performances so effective; mocking Lynn's sentimental performance style unhinged her "imaginary" connection with her listeners, and sneering at her naïve sincerity undermined the meaning of her persona to her fans. It is remarkable that despite the institution's ambivalence, BBC programmers saw Lynn, and the programmes in which she sang, as fulfilling a crucial wartime need. The Corporation negotiated the challenges of Lynn's persona and voice by limiting her to all-singing formats and banning impersonations that depicted her performances as comic. Vera Lynn's power lay in the way that she mobilized sentiment, femininity, and even the glimmerings of utopia in the confusion, fear, and loneliness of war. With her sincere persona and hybrid working class voice rising above the chorus - enacted or imagined - Lynn evoked community and the unity of the nation for the British in the Second World War.

#### Conclusion

"Where's the Vera Lynn for our war?" asked the conservative pundit Mark Steyn in a Daily London Telegraph column anticipating the 60th anniversary of VE-Day: "One of the reasons why it's effortlessly easy to 'commemorate' the Second World War is that popular culture had signed up for the duration...Enjoy Vera Lynn this weekend, but spare a thought for our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans at ceremonies 60 years from now.

Where's their soundtrack?" (2005). For Steyn, a "soundtrack" should function as a cheering section rather than as a site for critique or cultural negotiation. Nevertheless, he attributed enormous power to the cultural work done by popular music and its performers in the Second World War, both in their capacity to uphold national values and morale in wartime as well as to memorialize those values. Steyn employed cultural memory of World War II as a tool to indict contemporary actors, musicians, and Hollywood producers, who in their criticisms of the United States' war on terror "ha[ve] pretty much skipped the Vera Lynn phase."

What post-war nostalgia has cast as a "Vera Lynn phase" was clearly far more complex and contested. Lynn enacted through entertainment the community, connection, and sincerity desired so desperately by her wartime listeners. Her nostalgic status in cultural memory is so potent because her performances were "already" nostalgic. The sentimental registers referenced by Lynn's particular voice, repertory, and persona pointed to an idealized past existing beyond the war and opened a utopian space beyond it to imagine a better post-war society. Ironically, the sentimentality that made Lynn so problematic for the wartime BBC aided in her nostalgic construction in cultural memory of the war.

Steyn's column falls into a long tradition. The press in the Second World War also queried where the war poets, war songs, and martial music were hiding. With the hindsight of history and cultural memory, one may dismiss the ignorance of those silly enough to worry that sentimental singing would unman soldiers or expect Hollywood to produce even more jingoistic films for its global audiences. I argue, however, that they have entered into dialogue with a popular culture far more active as a site of contestation than those who prefer soundtracks have acknowledged.

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## Endnote

1. Lynn's popular 1939 recording of Ross Parker and Hughie Charles's song included the verse, but Sincerely Yours featured only its chorus, streamlining the sign-off and universalizing the message. The song is available in an array of "nostalgia" compilations and websites, but I have found two collections particularly useful (Lynn 1994 and 2000).

2. Ann Shelton, part of the wartime cohort of teenaged girl singers, was regarded by 1943 as one of the best English crooners. She was unusually young (aged eleven at the war's onset), but her excellent intonation and mature contralto lent credence to her falsely inflated age, which helped circumvent child labor laws and position her as a desirable pin-up for the forces.

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